Fairbury's Lost Railroad

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For: Fairbury Blade Newspaper
Date: March 13, 2020

In the early 1800s, it was commonly accepted that farmland had no value unless it had trees and was located near a river. This early belief is why Southern Illinois was the first part of the state to be settled. Early pioneer farmers did not want to come to the Fairbury area because it was swampy prairie and only had the Vermilion River running through it. Livingston County and Fairbury were the last areas in the State of Illinois to be settled.

Because there were no farmers in Central Illinois, there was no need for a railroad. There was a surge of pioneer farmers in the 1850s in the Fairbury area. Congress passed a new law granting land rights to Veterans of the War of 1812. Most of these veterans did not want to move to swampy Fairbury, so they sold their land rights to pioneer farmers. Many early Fairbury farmers bought their land from the government using either low cost land grants or they paid $2.50 cash per acre.

In 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad decided there were enough farmers in Central Illinois to justify extending their line from Peoria east to the Indiana border. Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the new railroad line came through this area.

Several different people decided around 1869 there should be a new railroad from Streator to Paducah, Kentucky. David Strawn, who owned a lot of farm land around now what is Strawn, Illinois, was one of the promoters of this new railroad.

The investors initially were going to install new tracks from Streator to Strawn. Intermediate stops would be at Pontiac and Forrest. The citizens of Forrest voted not to pay any interest on the new bonds issued until the new line was completed. This was unsatisfactory to the railroad company, so they decided to run the line through Fairbury instead of Forrest.

The businessmen of Fairbury were keenly aware of how much extra business additional railroad lines could bring. At that time, there was a feud between the West and East End business groups, with John Marsh leading the west side group. Marsh persuaded the Chicago & Paducah railroad to bring the line from Pontiac into his west side of Fairbury. The East End members were not happy about this decision.

The new railroad tracks were run from Pontiac to Fairbury in 1872. Stops along this portion of the line were Pontiac, McDowell, Lodemia, and Fairbury. The new tracks entered Fairbury on the west side, where the Honegger's feed mill was located. In Fairbury, the new tracks then ran east parallel with the TP&W tracks. Walnut Street was renamed Paducah Avenue. At some point, the new line turned south and went on to Strawn.

Just eight years after the new railroad was completed, the Chicago & Paducah Railroad faced foreclosure. In 1880 it was sold to the Wabash, St. Louis, and Pacific Railway. This company changed its name to the Wabash Railroad in 1887.

Somewhere around 1884, the portion of the track from Fairbury south to Strawn was removed. It was not really needed because other railroad lines ran in a north-south direction through Forrest. The line from Streator to Fairbury continued to operate until 1979, when the Streator branch was closed.

The Chicago & Paducah Railroad initially offered both freight cars and passenger cars from Fairbury to Pontiac. Grain harvested in this area was loaded onto this line at McDowell, Lodemia, and Fairbury. The grain elevator at McDowell added a hardware store and lumberyard to serve area farmers. Farmers could order lumber, which would be delivered by train to McDowell.

Dorothy Bodley-Tollensdorf was born in Lodemia in 1904. In 1909, when she was five years old, she walked a quarter-mile from her house to the Lodemia grain elevator. Every day she boarded a passenger car on the Wabash and rode it to St. Mary's school in Pontiac. Every night, the five year old returned home on the train. She also attended Pontiac High School using the train. Dorothy married Bernard Tollensdorf. Many current Fairbury residents fondly remember Dorothy working in the Fairbury Paint Store, just east of Bluestem Bank on Locust Street.

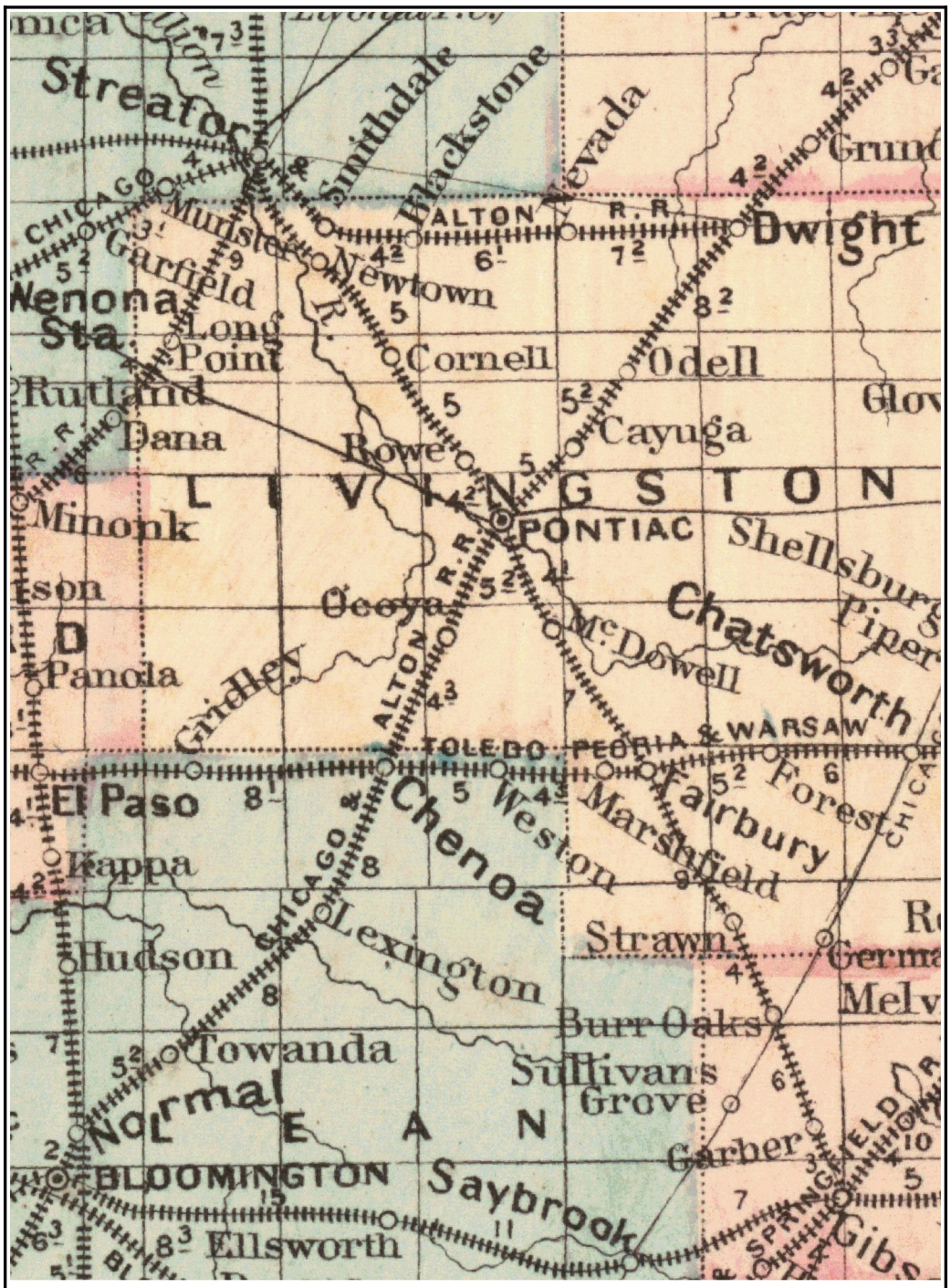
In the 1960s, farm children who lived along this railroad fondly remember picking and eating the little sweet wild strawberries that sprung up along the tracks. The children would also place pennies on the rails, so the train could run over and flatten them. The tracks were not in great condition, so the old freight train would travel fairly slowly between Lodemia and Fairbury.

After the Wabash closed this line, the rails and ties were removed. Evidence of where this line ran is still apparent where the tracks crossed the blacktop roads. Aerial views of the farmland also indicate where this portion of the line was located.

Several old maps still exist which show the branch of the Chicago & Paducah running from Fairbury to Strawn. Unfortunately, these old maps are not specific in showing the location of exactly where the tracks turned south towards Strawn. The earliest memories of older local farmers dates back to the 1940s. If the tracks were removed in 1884, by 1940 they would have been gone for 56 years. Six decades of farming where the tracks were removed has wiped out any physical evidence of the exactly track location.

Back in 1884, there were only dirt roads in the farm areas. Therefore, there is no evidence left where the old Fairbury to Strawn line crossed the dirt roads 136 years ago. The location of the Fairbury to Pontiac portion of the tracks will remain apparent for decades to come because of the remnants of the track crossings on the black top roads.

The exact location of where the railroad tracks turned south from Fairbury to Strawn remains a mystery. Maybe someday additional evidence will be uncovered which better defines the exact location of this "lost" railroad line.



1875 Railroad map showing Chicago & Paducah Line from Streator to Strawn